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Statement presented by Widows Rights International, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Invisibility of Widows in the Beijing Platform for Action

The Review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, at this 49th CSW, provides a unique opportunity to raise awareness on the issues of **Widowhood.**

The Status of Widows is one of the most neglected areas of gender issues and its invisibility in the text of the **BPFA** and its **Outcome Document** reflects this neglect. Yet the abuse of **widows'** human rights and status cut across every one of the twelve action areas of the Plan.

Now, as never before in world history, the numbers of **widows**, as percentages of the female population in many countries, have risen unprecedentedly, due to armed conflict, ethnic cleansing, AIDs, natural disasters, child marriage, age disparities between marriage partners, and, in some regions, the reduced life expectancy of men.

In conflict-afflicted countries, for example, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Sudan (Darfur), it is estimated that almost half the female population are widows or wives of the missing.

Widows are of all ages, from children to the very old. In many developing countries the majority lives in extreme poverty and marginalisation, without legal rights and often exposed to mental, physical and sexual abuse and economic exploitation by their families and society generally.

Life-threatening and degrading mourning and burial rites, lack of rights to inheritance, land ownership, custody of children and cruelly restrictive lifestyles hamper widows' crucial roles as sole supporters of children, and other dependants, and as key contributors to social and economic development.

In spite of law reforms to comply with the **Beijing Platform** and the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women** that theoretically provide for equality in inheritance laws and criminalise gender violence and harmful traditional practices, abuse of widows continues unabated across regions and cultures. **Widows** may have little access to the justice systems, and their lives are often determined by discriminatory and oppressive traditional and customary codes of law which conflict with human rights norms.

However, in spite of the acknowledged huge increase in the numbers of **widows** in many parts of the world, there has been no systematic attempt to gather statistics or undertake any situational analysis of **widowhood**. This is particularly needed in the context of reconstruction - whether reconstruction following conflict, or reconstruction in the wake of the Tsunami that has caused the deaths of thousands in Asia.

Furthermore, **Widows' needs (long-term as well as short-term) and roles** must be fully recognised in post-conflict scenarios where implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 is addressed.

The issues of **Widowhood** impact upon the whole of society. We know that poverty breeds conflict. One of the major root causes of the terrible poverty of millions of children following war is their mothers' widowhood and low status. The **Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)** cannot be achieved until the injustices of widowhood are remedied, and widows obtain their full legal and human rights.

We invite this Commission on the Status of Women at its forty-ninth session to ensure that the status of widows be prioritised as an "emerging issue" in the final documents, so that appropriate programmes can be established and the status of widows properly addressed.